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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KAMPALA 001391

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [UG](#)  
SUBJECT: POLICE ARREST MAYOR (AGAIN) AND TEAR GAS  
OPPOSITION IN WESTERN UGANDA

REF: A. KAMPALA 01249  
[1](#)B. KAMPALA 00946

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Aaron Sampson for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On December 1, police arrested the Mayor of the western Ugandan town of Hoima and senior member of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) party, Francis Atugonza, for alleged abuse of office. Atugonza recently sued the Chief of Military Intelligence for torture following his previous arrest in April. On December 6, police in Hoima used riot gear, tear gas, and batons to prevent the FDC's president and likely presidential candidate, Kizza Besigye, from holding a rally. Senior National Resistance Movement (NRM) leaders are concerned about FDC inroads around Hoima, which has traditionally supported President Museveni. Atugonza's arrest and Besigye's canceled rally appear to be government attempts to harass and undermine opposition parties in western Uganda. End Summary.

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FDC Mayor Arrested, Again  
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[1](#)2. (U) Police arrested Hoima Mayor Francis Atugonza on December 1, charging him with abuse of office for allegedly selling public land and pocketing the profits. He will remain in jail until his December 17 court date. In April, Atugonza, who is also the FDC's National Secretary for Trade and Finance, was arrested, allegedly beaten with an iron bar, and incarcerated in a Kampala "safe house" by the Joint Anti-Terrorism Taskforce (JATT) under the authority of the Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence (CMI). Atugonza subsequently sued CMI's Director, Brig. Gen. James Mugira, for torture inflicted upon him while in custody. The court case, which is closed to the public for national security reasons, is ongoing (ref. A).

[1](#)3. (C) The U.S. Mission's EconOff was scheduled to meet with Atugonza on December 2 in Hoima. Standing in for Atugonza, the FDC's Hoima District Chair Jackson Wabyona said Atugonza's arrest is a continuation of NRM harassment of Hoima's FDC leadership. Wabyona said the charges levied against Atugonza are two year old allegations stemming from the sale of private, not government land, and that the Hoima town council has never claimed ownership of the property. Wabyona linked the timing of the arrest to a December 5-6 meeting in Hoima of opposition parties belonging to the Inter-Party Cooperation (IPC) coalition, as well as a December 7 visit to Hoima by President Museveni. Wabyona speculated that authorities arrested Atugonza to prevent him from speaking at the IPC meeting and also from introducing Museveni, in his role as Mayor, on December 7.

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Undermining the FDC in Hoima

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¶4. (SBU) Atugonza's arrest and the subsequent disruption of Besigye's rally are only the latest government attempts to disrupt FDC operations in Hoima, where FDC support in this oil rich region appears to be growing. On October 21, shortly after Atugonza initiated legal proceedings against CMI boss Mugira for torture, Security Minister and NRM Secretary General Amama Mbabazi warned of growing FDC influence around Hoima, instructed local NRM party members not to work with the opposition, and required NRM officials elected to Hoima's FDC-led Town Council to resign. According to one local newspaper account, Mbabazi asked Hoima NRM leaders: "Who authorized you to join an executive led by an FDC person? Who authorized you to join the FDC?" Mbabazi subsequently issued a similar directive to NRM officials elected to the opposition-led Town Council in Kumi in eastern Uganda.

¶5. (SBU) The NRM officials in Hoima resigned, leaving only Atugonza and one other Council official to oversee a town of 400,000 to 500,000 inhabitants. During a December 9 visit to Hoima by Agriculture Minister Hope Mwesigye, Atugonza condemned the resignations and President Museveni's proposal to "ring-fence" elected offices in western Uganda to ethnic Banyoro only (ref. B). In response, Minister Mwesigye warned Atugonza to "quit the opposition or lose your seat" as Mayor.

¶6. (C) Hoima's Deputy Resident District Commissioner and NRM official Joseph Kakooza told EconOff on December 2 that Atugonza's case was just another "arrest of a corrupt public official". Kakooza downplayed Mbabazi's directive

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instructing elected NRM members to resign from the Hoima Town Council, but stated that 11 NRM officials have resigned from various levels of Hoima's local government. He added that multiparty politics are still relatively new to Uganda, having been introduced only in 2005. On December 9, the State Minister for Local Government, Perez Ahabwe, also downplayed Mbabazi's directive, saying that Mbabazi's comments are based on the NRM constitution and do not reflect official Ugandan government policy. Ahabwe indicated that he believes Mbabazi's statements hinder the effectiveness of local government, but that Mbabazi is unlikely to temper his view based on Ahabwe's input.

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Police Tear Gas Besigye  
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¶7. (SBU) Cognizant of the beating Atugonza suffered after his April arrest, FDC president and likely presidential candidate Kizza Besigye visited Atugonza in prison on December 6. After the visit, police in riot gear used road blocks, tear gas, and batons to prevent Besigye and FDC supporters from entering downtown Hoima to participate in the already scheduled IPC rally. According to police, Besigye was authorized to visit the prison but not to address the IPC rally. Local media quoted a Hoima police official as stating that the IPC had been forewarned and that "we have stocked enough tear gas and standby policeman to handle the situation."

¶8. (SBU) In a press conference after the incident, Besigye criticized the police response, stating: "This is a rogue regime that disrespects the rule of law and human rights. We came to visit our person who was imprisoned because of the usual persecution we go through and also talk to our people about the Inter-Party Cooperation but we were welcomed by anti-riot police." Police also allegedly prevented another FDC leader, the party's vice president for western Uganda Patrick Baguma, from organizing a separate rally in another part of Hoima.

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19. (C) Police and government officials continue to invoke the Police Act to disrupt opposition rallies and gatherings, even though a 2008 Constitutional Court ruling declared unconstitutional the portions of the act - Articles 32 and 35 which require written permission of the Inspector General of Police to hold any assembly consisting of 25 persons or more - used by police to block opposition meetings. A pending appeal by the Ministry of Justice enables the police to continue to apply these rules to opposition activities. The two prime targets for the moment are the FDC and Betty Nambooze, who is the Democratic Party (DP) spokesperson and a Buganda Kingdom activist. On December 1, police used tear gas and security vehicles to block DP members from celebrating Nambooze's arrival at Entebbe Airport, and to prevent local journalists from filming the incidents. Government suppression of the opposition in Hoima is especially dangerous in light of rising ethnic tensions in Bunyoro, accelerating oil exploration nearby, and the NRM's traditional reliance on the western Uganda electorate.

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